

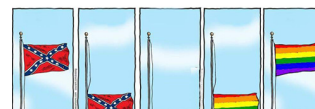
Love Wins – by God’s Grace

A reflection on the Supreme Court’s affirmation of Marriage Equality,
and of the aftermath of the shooting in Charleston, SC.

Romans 8:28; 12:15-18
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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This past week has been one for this history books! The combination of events, intertwining politics and religion in the name of social justice, were perhaps summarized best in a simple **editorial cartoon** that started making its way around the Internet on Friday. There are no words, just 5 separate panels. In the first, the Confederate battle flag flies at full-mast. The second panel shows the flag at half-mast, indicating that it is being taken down. The third shows an empty flag poll. The fourth panel shows a rainbow flag, the symbol for LGBTQ equality, at half-mast, being raised. And the final panel shows the rainbow flag at full-mast.



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Today’s sermon was supposed to be the second in a series entitled, “Connecting With God.” The particular emphasis this week was to be about “Reconnecting With Compassion.” I’m not sure how much you watched or read about the Supreme Court’s decision making marriage equality the law of the land, or the eulogy delivered by President Obama, in full preacher mode, in Charleston, SC. I spent the entire day on Friday, my day off, glued to the TV, following both of these stories to the extreme. Why? Because **what I saw and experienced in these events was a genuine connection with God, and particularly a reconnection with compassion. In other words, for me it was a spiritual experience.** And I know I’m not alone in that experience. Perhaps that’s true for you as well.

The new reality of marriage equality is perhaps best summarized by the simple, yet profound words, “Love Wins.” Everywhere, that is, except in some religious circles. What irony! My personal and pastoral approach on this matter echoes the one stated by the Rev. Dr. Marlin Lavanhar, senior minister of Tulsa’s All Souls Unitarian Church, in yesterday’s *Tulsa World*. He’s quoted:

While some Christians will disagree, we remain committed to what we understand to be the gospel of Jesus which teaches us that **if there is a conflict between love and belief, one should always choose love.**

I would suspect that most, if not all of us gathered here today would conclude that genuine love, commitment, and justice have won the day. That sentiment was affirmed in the concluding paragraph of the **Supreme Court’s majority opinion, written by Justice Anthony Kennedy.** Concerning the LGBTQ community, he writes:

Their hope is not to be condemned to live in loneliness, excluded from one of civilization's oldest institutions. They ask for equal dignity in the eyes of the law. The Constitution grants them that right...It is so ordered.

Yet even as we celebrate this transformative landmark ruling, we must be careful not to become complacent. For as they say, there is still much work to do. The Rev. Dr. J. Herbert Nelson, director of the Presbyterian Church (USA) Office of Public Witness in Washington DC (who happened to be the guest speaker at our recent presbytery meeting that was held at First Presbyterian Church here in Tulsa) responded on Friday with the following admonition: **"Our task now is to educate congregations and address how the church is to engage society and our differences."** How affirming it is to hear it declared that education is indeed a primary contribution in the effort to change hearts and minds. Helping to eradicate (or at least reduce) ignorance, especially willful ignorance, has certainly been an integral part of the ministry process here at College Hill.

Nelson rightfully continues, "It's much more than a gay/lesbian issue. We are seeing laws overturned in favor of communities that have not always been represented." I can't be sure, but I'm wondering if he had in mind the fact that the legislature of the state of South Carolina will soon be considering a law to remove the Confederate battle flag from their capital grounds, as it was at the Alabama capital a few days ago.

President Barack Obama boldly addressed this issue in his eulogy on Friday for slain Charleston, SC, pastor, the Rev. Clementa Pinckney. In what felt more like a sermon, one commentator mentioned afterwards that the President filled the role of "Minister in Chief." I highly encourage you to watch the video of that eulogy. It is deeply profound on many levels, including the much-publicized conclusion when the President broke into singing the hymn *Amazing Grace*, joined by the 5000+ in attendance.

Perhaps reflecting his own Christian faith, and sounding like a preacher, President Obama stated that Rev. Pinckney, "embodied the idea that **our Christian faith demands deeds and not just words**, that the sweet hour of prayer actually lasts the whole week long, that to put our faith in action is more than just individual salvation, it's about our collective salvation, that to feed the hungry, clothe the naked and house the homeless is not just a call for isolated charity but the imperative of a just society." He also eloquently reflected upon the profound and historic role of the church as a center of African-American life.

In addressing the heinous act of the killer of those nine people attending a Bible study in their own church, Emanuel AMC, the President called it, "an act that [the killer] imagined would incite fear and recrimination, violence and suspicion, an act that he presumed would deepen divisions that trace back to our nation's original sin," a reference to slavery. And in a statement that surprised even the gathered congregation, he added, "Oh, but God works in mysterious ways. God has different ideas. [The killer] didn't know he was being used by God."

A word of caution here, from a progressive perspective. I don't know for sure the President's personal belief, or exactly his point of reference, but **I strongly believe that God does not cause things to happen just so particular outcomes can be achieved. Rather, it is my understanding that God can use whatever does happen, even the most**

heinous and evil of acts, and somehow – through grace – bring about some good.

That's how I interpret Romans 8:28, "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to God's purpose."

Like the President, then, I believe **God has used this racist act of hatred to reveal remarkable acts of grace.** The grace, for instance, of the families of the fallen who responded to the killer in the midst of unspeakable grief with words of forgiveness. (And we have trouble forgiving someone who cuts us off in traffic.) There's also the act of grace of elected officials in South Carolina and people throughout the country to respond with "a thoughtful introspection and self-examination that we so rarely see in public life."

It is important for us, as well, to reflect upon the **theological understanding of God's grace.** Grace is perhaps *the* hallmark of the Presbyterian tradition. We rightfully claim that God's grace is not earned or merited, but is rather simply the free and benevolent favor of God. The President rightfully reminded the country that in recognition of God's grace, "it is up to us now to make the most of it, to receive it with gratitude." Spoken like a true Presbyterian.

Like shining a light in a dark place, President Obama made reference to the words from the hymn *Amazing Grace* by providing a litany of things where we have been lost but now are found, have been blind but now we see. That included seeing the Confederate Flag as "representing more than ancestral pride," but also as a "reminder of systematic oppression and racial subjugation." Few people could have imagined an American president making the following declaration:

Removing the flag from this state's capital would not be an act of political correctness. It would not be an insult to the valor of Confederate soldiers. It would simply be acknowledgement that **the cause for which they fought, the cause of slavery, was wrong.** The imposition of Jim Crow after the Civil War, the resistance to civil rights for all people was wrong.

There are so many Americans who have wanted to hear these words directly from our first African-American president. To add emphasis, and **to put it into a theological perspective, he added, "By taking down that flag, we express God's grace."**

Expanding that grace into other areas of social justice, President Obama then challenged the country to address other injustices that continue to shape the present, like permitting "so many of our children to languish in poverty, or attend dilapidated schools or grow up without prospects for a job or for a career. Perhaps," he added, "it causes us to **examine what we're doing to cause some of our children to hate.**"

He went on to mention injustices currently found in our criminal-justice system, certain law enforcement practices, the lack of equal opportunities for employment, and barriers to voting access. The President even addressed our blindness to "the unique mayhem that **gun violence** inflicts upon this nation."

Unfortunately, all these issues have found a home in divisive partisan politics. They are, instead, issues of social justice that we, as people of faith, believe God has called us to address. I couldn't agree more with the President when he shared the belief that **when we honestly address these issues, we express God's grace.** And he warned the country to not allow ourselves "to slip into a comfortable silence again."

Part of our mission and ministry in this congregation is to not avoid the “uncomfortable truths about the prejudice that still infects our society.” And yes, if we're honest with ourselves, prejudice that still infects each one of us. Therefore, we must engage in the hard work of more lasting change, just as we have done concerning LGBTQ issues of equality. For as was stated in his eulogy, “justice grows out of recognition of ourselves in each other; that my liberty depends on you being free, too.”

Indeed, we are all created equal in the eyes of God. And sometimes, like with the Supreme Court decision, justice “arrives like a thunderbolt.” This week we have indeed moved toward becoming a more perfect union.

I hope that your experiences of this past week have led you to a deeper connection with God, especially in and through a reconnection with compassion. I'll continue this theme next Sunday.

Amen.